

## A Weekly FAX from the Center for Substance Abuse Research

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### *Alcohol-Related Content Pervasive on Facebook; Most Accessible to Underage Users*

Much of the alcohol-related content on Facebook is easily accessible by the approximately one-third of users who are under the age of 21, according to a qualitative study conducted by the Marin Institute. Despite guidelines requiring age restrictions, the study found that content promoting alcohol and dangerous drinking was accessible by underage users across all five of the most popular Facebook features—advertisements, pages, applications, events, and groups.

**Advertisements:** Alcohol companies can buy ad space on Facebook, which allows them to access user's profile information and target their ads to specific audiences. One out of every eight ads were alcohol related and all alcohol-related ads were displayed to under-21 users.

**Pages:** Facebook pages are customizable profiles that can be made by an organization, product, or public personality. Facebook users can become fans of pages or "like" them, leaving the user with an affiliation to that topic. The ten top selling beer brands had 93 pages with a total of more than 1.1 million fans, while the ten top selling spirit brands had 334 pages for spirit brands with more than 3.2 million fans. Only 50% of the pages reviewed restricted access based on age. Six of the twelve top beer and spirit brands were accessible to under 21 users, allowing them to become a fan and receive marketing messages.

**Applications:** Facebook applications are designed for interactive behavior—users can play games, take quizzes and rate brands. More than 500 Facebook applications are associated with the term alcohol. Four of the six alcohol applications reviewed by the study were accessible to underage users, allowing them to send virtual alcohol shots to other Facebook friends and be a virtual bartender.

**Events:** Facebook events allow companies to advertise a time, location and description of special occasion. Many events are ads for nightclubs, concerts or sporting events sponsored by an alcohol brand or companies. More than 4,400 events were found associated with the five best selling beer and liquor brands. There were no age restrictions found for these events.

**Groups:** Facebook groups can be created by any Facebook user about almost any topic. Once an individual user joins the group it is displayed on that member's profile. Groups have their own discussion boards, photos, videos, event listings, and web links. When searching Facebook groups using the term "alcohol," more than 58,000 results appear. Each group reviewed by the study advertised alcohol with hyperlinks, photos, and graphics; none of the groups were restricted based on age.

The study concludes that "Facebook's policies regarding alcohol ads and alcohol-related content in Pages, Applications, Events, and Groups do not effectively protect its users from exposure" (p. 3). The study authors recommend that Facebook stop accepting paid advertisements for alcohol products; stop allowing alcohol-related pages, applications, events and groups; and hire external monitors to enforce these regulations. They also suggest that "the alcohol industry must also question its affiliation with Facebook as a marketing tool when content so blatantly violates many of the industry's own advertising guidelines" (p. 4).

SOURCE: Adapted by CESAR from Mart, S., Mergendoller, J., Simon, M., "Alcohol Promotion on Facebook," *The Journal of Global Drug Policy and Practice*, 3(3), 2009. Available online at <http://globaldrugpolicy.org/3/3/1.php>.